

# Remarks by Mr. Ivan Šimonoviæ, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights at the Informal Briefing to the General Assembly on the situation in Syria

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Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Five years of suffering. Over 250.000 people killed. Half of the population displaced.

It is hard for most of us to process the scale of the violence in Syria.

So I begin with four stories of individuals, suffering at the hands of various parties to the conflict.

The first story is of a 15-year-old and a 16-year-old, who - together with seven other civilians - were killed on 19 April when an airstrike by Government forces or their allies hit the fish market in the busiest part of Kafr Nabel (Idleb Governorate).

The second is a 16-year old Yazidi girl.

Like so many other woman in her community, she was abducted from Iraq. And then she was sold into sexual slavery in Syria.

She was forced to use violence to escape. And even when she was free, she had nowhere to go. So she returned to the house where other Yazidi girls were held and abused.

Against all odds, she managed to escape again and rejoin her community. And fortunately, that community – facing what may amount to genocide - is wise enough to refuse to allow their girls to be stigmatized by sexual crimes. But thousands of others are still being held, raped and tortured.

The third story is also of a teenager - a 16-year old boy. He was accused of homosexuality. This young man was killed by ISIL: he was stoned to death.

Another boy, just 15, was on his way to school. Despite the violence and chaos, he was brave enough to try to sit for the exams he had that day. But when he reached the government checkpoint in Deir ez-Zour, he was arrested and taken by one of the Military

Security Branches in Damascus. He was tortured to death. Just 15.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the sixth year of horror for Syrians. So many have suffered torture, destruction and death, their story is no longer 'news'. It may be difficult to grasp the effect of millions of rights violations in the Syrian conflict - but it is plain to see they must be stopped.

The crisis is rooted in human rights violations.

It began with peaceful protests. Young people across Syria were exercising their fundamental human right to freedom of opinion and freedom of assembly.

This should have led to reforms and peaceful political development. Instead, a violent crackdown unleashed the unspeakable violations we see today.

Terrorists gained ground in this lawless environment. They further infringed on the rights of the Syrian people.

Parties to the conflict, including some from outside Syria, continue to blatantly disregard human rights and international humanitarian law.

They are launching indiscriminate attacks.

They are using disproportionate force.

They are killing civilians with air strikes, rockets, barrel bombs and more.

They are sending fighters into heavily populated areas.

And the parties are destroying protected sites: the schools, hospitals and other public buildings.

We are especially alarmed by the destruction of medical units.

Last month, the Secretary-General condemned the 360 attacks on 250 medical facilities since the early days of the conflict. Several hundred medical workers have been killed.

This May alone, we documented at least seven more incidents of parties damaging or destroying medical units.

The result is this: in parts of Syria, even if there may be some possibility of medical help, civilians are too scared to seek it.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians remain trapped in besieged areas across Syria. Many innocent civilians are at risk of starvation.

Across Syria a very large number of persons are being subjected to arbitrary detention and deprivation of liberty in the most appalling conditions. Many are tortured and many die while in detention. The fate of several thousand missing persons must be clarified.

These descriptions are the living nightmare of Syria's people today. The only way to instill hope for tomorrow is to insist on full respect for human rights as we press for a political solution.

Ceasefires and humanitarian relief can be augmented with other steps.

The release of hostages and unlawfully detained persons, including women and children, would open new avenues of trust.

So would the exchange of information on missing persons.

These processes could provide a sound framework for an incremental approach to concession-making.

To be sustainable, peace in Syria must deliver tangible benefits for all communities. It must provide a democratic, dignified and peaceful framework for managing Syria's multicultural and multi-religious diversity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human rights should never, ever be seen as an obstacle to a successful negotiation. The opposite is true: human rights are a key enabler of a successful negotiation. And they are a safeguard for sustainable peace.

The Syrian Government has not only failed to protect civilians. It has often deliberately targeted them. So have some opposition forces, especially ISIL.

Syrians will need to come to terms with the bitter legacy of this conflict. The Secretary-General and the High Commissioner have repeatedly called for accountability. They have underscored the need for the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Accountability is only one part of a broader approach to dealing with the past. It should also encompass elements of truth-seeking, reparations, institutional reform, criminal justice, and eventually reconciliation.

Mr. President,

Let me conclude. I have tried to go to Syria but have never been let in. Nor have my OHCHR colleagues.

Although we have been unable to meet with Syrians in the country, we have talked to many in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, but also all over the world.

Their message is clear: they want peace, rule of law and human rights.

“We can rebuild Syria”, they said. “Just let us do it!”

Their leaders should listen to the Syrian people. And so should we.

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